

# **The Generational Separation within the Wiccan Religion: How Age Shapes Beliefs and Practices**

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## **Abstract**

A major limitation within studies of Wicca regards the generational separation between practitioners. The intent for this study was to analyze how age and generation can influence the shape and belief system of the practicing Wicca. Based on semi-structured interviews with individuals who self-identify as Wiccan, two distinct groups--separated mainly by age--were recognized. Variables such as age, stake in conformity, education, political affiliation, and familial satisfaction were measured to illustrate the differences between the two groups. These differences include attitude about social media, belief in the existence of individualized Wicca, and how the political and social climate is changing. Individual narratives were recorded and analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Using the qualitative analytic software Dedoose, the qualitative measures of this study were coded for emergent themes.

## **Introduction**

A main theory in the field of sociology of religion is the theory of secularization. This theory states that because individualism is emphasized in society, religion will no longer be of importance within our society; it will stop being part of the superstructure that influences all aspects of culture. However, New Religious Movements such as Wicca, provide an individualized process of religion--combining religion and individuality into one process. The emphasis on individuality in New Religious Movements is uncommon due to the overly communal aspects of many such movements. Due to the Internet, religions such as Wicca are able to become more personalized and solitary due to the removal of a "mentor" to teach rituals, practices, and beliefs of the religion. New Religious Movements such as Wicca are becoming more popular due to this personalization and removal of the "mentor". According to the U.S. Census in 1990, only eight thousand people identified themselves as Wiccan. However, in 2008, these numbers increased to over three hundred thousand people. My study aimed to analyze the relationship between age and the beliefs and practices of the specific Wiccan practitioner. The Wiccan religious movement will be qualitatively studied in this research through semi-structured interviews and personal narratives; this study will look at how individuals learned of their religion, whether the religion is communal in practice, and how individual characteristics influence the participant's choice of membership in alternate religions—in relation to age. The purpose of this study is to examine why individuals choose to join the Wicca religion. The research question asked in this study will be "does age in Wiccan practitioners influence their stake in conformity, use of the internet, education, political affiliation, and familial satisfaction?"

H1: Younger practitioners will be more open about their religious beliefs.

H2: Older practitioners will have a higher stake in conformity than younger practitioners.

H3: Younger practitioners will be less satisfied with their families than older practitioners.

H4: Younger practitioners will have a more individualized practice than older practitioners.

H5: Older practitioners will not use the internet as often for their religion as younger practitioners.

## Literature Review

The Wiccan religion, often called Witchcraft or the Craft, is defined as an experience-based, earth-centered form of spirituality that describes its roots as pre-Christian, pantheistic, animistic, and polytheistic<sup>1</sup>. The U.S. Census marked an increase in Wiccan membership since 1990; however, given that most Wiccans do not join membership organizations of any kind but belong to small autonomous groups or are solo practitioners, numbers are difficult to assess<sup>14</sup>. The American Religious Identification Survey measured approximately 134,000 Wiccans in 2000, showing increasing numbers from 1990<sup>2</sup>. There are studies that look at how Wiccans regard the media portrayal of their religion<sup>3,4</sup>, while others look at how gender, sexuality, and feminism play a role within Wiccan gatherings<sup>2,5,6</sup>. Often, researchers look at particular covens in the Wiccan religion, rather than the individual unit of analysis that Wicca provides as a unique religious movement<sup>1,2,5,6</sup>. Other studies involving the Wiccan faith include familial acceptance of the participant identifying as Wiccan<sup>1,2</sup>, and how media influences people to convert to the Wiccan faith<sup>3,4</sup>.

Looking at mainly communal-based Wicca, researchers have noticed that the structure of communal Wicca is both improvised and uniform. Structure within the Wiccan religion is partly standard ritual and partly improvisations to fit the members of the coven studied, according to Johnston<sup>7</sup>. Within these rituals, a balance between structured basics--which allows for outsiders to recognize the structure of Wicca--and spontaneity is very important. The basic structure of Wicca celebrates each full moon as well as eight seasonal sabbats; these are celebrated through community events, open rituals, semi-private rituals, and private rituals.

### *Literature on New Religious Movements*

In regard to New Religious Movements, various studies have been made on how individuals decide on a New Religious Movement compared to a mainstream religion. Studies have looked at how individual characteristics like lack of identity, shown through changes in employment, behavior, diet, or even in romantic endeavors; social isolation, causing a craving for interaction through a communal NRM; and need for a solution for a problem society has not yet solved, either personal or social; have affected the choice of membership to a New Religious Movement<sup>8</sup>. The Stark and Bainbridge Theory of Affiliation looks at an individual's variables such as stake in conformity, education, strength of conventional religious organizations, and several items measuring turning points, including the subjects' number of marriages, number of moves, number of jobs, and number of authority figures they lived with while growing up<sup>9,10</sup>. According to Stark and Bainbridge<sup>9</sup>, a person is more likely to join a New Religious Movement if they have low stakes in conformity, desire limited rewards but lack the social power to obtain them and no dominant religious tradition supported by the elite, have repeatedly experienced turning points in their lives, and are highly educated.

Studies have also looked at how familial composition affects choice of religion through person-religion fit deprivation theory<sup>11</sup>. These studies look at variables such as family dissatisfaction, biographical experiences, group offers, personalities with "typical convert characteristics", loss of a parent, number of siblings, birth order, and family history with the religion<sup>11</sup>. According to Wright and Piper<sup>12</sup>, young people seek out groups offering deep, interpersonal relations in a communal context due to the weakening of parental authority and conventional family values. Most communal NRMs use the lack of familial bonds in individuals to gain members by providing and emphasizing the family-like character of their internal bonds; these are considered spiritual families, held together by brotherly/sisterly love and charismatic

leaders who present themselves as parental figures through rituals and collective representations. According to Namini and Murken's study<sup>11</sup>, many individuals had lost a father during their childhood; because of this, many use the NRM to find a personal God or father-like figure to replace the father they lost in childhood. Jacobs<sup>13</sup> states:

[charismatic alternative religions are] the desire to experience both the ideal family and the fathering of a protective and loving male authority figure. As such, conversion reflects the failure of the middle class family to meet the needs of contemporary society and the attending disillusionment with the nature of fathering in American culture (55).

Therefore, familial composition--specifically in regards to authority figures--is a statistically important variable in regard to analyzing why an individual chooses a New Religious Movement.

#### *Common Limitations in the Literature*

A major common limitation within the literature on Wicca as a New Religious Movement is looking at Wicca at the individual unit of analysis. Many studies look only at an interconnected group of Wiccans, or a coven. However, this study proposes to look at the Wiccan religion at an individual level; this study proposes to have individuals define their religion and describe it as either communal or individual, then these individuals would be sorted by age. Other limitations include geography--looking only in one location--and use of the internet, never actually meeting the participants. Studies on LGBTQIA+ individuals within Wiccan groups is limited due to the small sample population and difficulty in finding subjects. Many of the most recent studies are also from the 1990s, leading to the possibility of change and acceptance of Wiccan individuals within society.

#### **Methods**

The selection of participants for this study was based on criteria. A major inclusion criteria for this study was that the participants must be a practitioner of the pagan religion Wicca and 18+. A major exclusion was that those who do not practice Wicca cannot participate in this study. Other exclusions include minors under the age of 18 as well as those with limited decision-making capacity, language barriers, and/or hearing difficulty. The researcher used a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling to find all 10 participants. The researcher also used social media to contact possible participants for the study.

This research was done via semi-structured qualitative interviews. This was decided on due to the ability for the individual to self-identify their religion and tell their own narrative about their religion. Interviews were the primary methods. The interviews will be performed and audio recorded for coding purposes and to ensure reliability and validity within the research. Verbal consent to interview and record will be asked on tape to include consent while preserving confidentiality, as well as a signed consent form. The researcher scheduled interviews with each participant, using a semi-structured method of interview to gain information. The interviews were held either in the participant's home or a public space, depending on the comfort of the participant.

Questions asked by the researcher reviewed topics such as demographics (age, race, gender, ethnicity, education level, political affiliation), each practitioner's discovery of Wicca as a religion, what practices are commonly used for their worship, the number of people involved in their practices, their opinions on the portrayal of Wicca in mass media, the use of social media and internet in finding practitioners and/or rituals to perform, family characteristics (religion, composition, relations, and political affiliation), and how the participant would describe their

childhood. To analyze and code this qualitative information, the analytical software Dedoose was used to do line-by-line coding.

### **Interview Data and Analysis**

Two types of participants were observed during the interview process. Group One consisted of mainly white individuals of an older average age (above 40) who believe solitary practitioners are non-existent in the traditions of Wicca; These participants dislike the Internet due to “untrue facts” about their religion found online, and believe Wiccans should hide their religion due to future persecution. Group Two consists of mainly white individuals of a younger average age (below 40) who believe communal practice is a choice (and even preferred for some). These participants use the Internet to connect with peers and like the easily-accessible, widespread information. They also believe that today’s society is more accepting of non-mainstream religions.

The similarities between the two groups were few: participants were mainly liberally-minded, with a college education, who dislike the portrayal of their religion in mass media, and discovered Wicca during their formative years (late teens to early twenties). The differences between groups—besides age—were many. Differences included opinion on the Internet’s effect on Wicca, the existence of solitary practitioners, acceptance of Wicca in mainstream culture, and the differences of ritual and personalization. Other differences included descriptions of childhood, familial demographics, and social media usage. To illustrate these differences, two specific participant interviews (one from each group) was selected and analyzed.

Marla (Participant A) is a 66-year-old white female. Marla is registered as an Independent, but states that her political views lean more liberally than conservatively. She is married with children, has been practicing Wicca since her late 20s, and has some college education. Marla belongs to Group A. The second participant, Rick (Participant B), is a 32-year-old white male who describes his political views as “radically liberal”. Rick is single, has been practicing Wicca since age 15, and has some college education.

#### *Views on Solitary Practice*

Marla, like many practitioners located in Group One, believed that solitary practitioners did not exist in the Wiccan religion. They believed that Wicca was not, in fact, a solitary religion, but was communal in nature. Without having the rituals be communal, it would not be Wiccan at all:

*[When I was young,] I wasn’t really Wicca, because Wicca, as I understand it now, is a tradition. And it is initiatory, and I wasn’t initiated. In the Wiccan world, there is no such thing as a solitary practitioner.*

Marla feels that although she was young and alone when she discovered her religion, she was still not a Wiccan practitioner until she found her eclectic group. She stated that she discovered the Wiccan religion by reading a book, but did not realize that she was practicing incorrectly. She felt that although solitary practitioners are not valid in her definition of Wicca, she saw why such a practitioner would be beneficial:

*[Scott Cunningham’s book, Solitary Practitioner] went overboard and he was criticized for it, but I saw his point. He wanted to make it available to people so that they could see it.*

Marla continued to insist that my research in itself was faulty due to the non-existence of those who are defined as solitary practitioners. She further explained how there are multiple levels of initiation into the “secrets of Wicca” by those who are considered higher up in the initiatory hierarchy of her eclectic group.

Rick, on the other hand, stated that he was both a solitary and communal practitioner. He stated that he practiced both by himself and with others in a group. According to Rick,

*When it's personal, which is a reason why a lot of people practice any sort of witchcraft or workings, they don't talk about what they do, because it's something so personal to them that it makes sense to them. And I think a lot of Pagan practices instill that. And I think that that's why it's more profound.*

Rick continues to describe his practices as a comparison to Christianity. He compared Christian mass to his communal rituals with his circle and individual prayer to the workings he does on his own. Rick stated that, depending on the person, individual practice could be more effective than communal practice due to the personal preferences of the individual. Rick also stated that he preferred individual practice because it allowed him to personalize the rituals for his specific experiences.

#### *Views on Use of Social Media*

As Rick is part of the younger group, he was more comfortable with the idea of his religion being connected and shared via social media and the internet. He stated that he is part of a local Wiccan Facebook group, multiple pages, and even group chats where he discussed his religion with those who were curious. Rick also writes a blog about his religious practices so people can be informed from a reliable source, to create outreach from the Wiccan community:

*At this point, [social media] is more about the community building right now than going around and becoming a coven and casting spells, and lighting candles and dancing around with flower crowns on your head. It's more, the use of social media to interact with other pagans, create a sense of outreach.*

Rick uses his social media to contact other pagans for events, learn new tips and tricks for his rituals, and create a relationship with other eclectic groups for large-scale events. Rick enjoys the use of the Internet for this purpose; he is also welcoming of those who use the Internet for their first source of learning about the Wiccan religion:

*I do like the reach of [the internet] because I like the idea of so much accessibility and education people have so we can honor other people's differences.*

Marla states that she is uncomfortable with the use of the Internet to discover information about the Wiccan religion. She is constantly concerned with the dissemination of incorrect and inaccurate information regarding her religion. Marla argues that because there is no such thing as a solitary practitioner, the Internet merely skews the idea of the Wiccan religion in general.

#### *Views on Acceptance in Society*

Marla is concerned about the acceptance of her religion in today's society. As someone who closely follows the political world, she is concerned with the polarized climate in the United

States—as well as the discrimination against more mainstream religions. Marla states that those who are discriminatory against more mainstream religion will come to hate the Wiccans next:

*I am worried about the current political environment. There have been witch burnings in the past, and if people are too open about being Wiccan, I am worried there will be witch burnings again.*

Rick, on the other hand, is less concerned about today's environment due to the culture of learning and acceptance he experiences on a daily basis. Rick encourages people to ask him questions about his religion, stating that he feels that curiosity should be encouraged to continue to let the Wiccan religion grow.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper is to examine how the generational stratification found in today's society is also reflected within non-mainstream religions, such as Wicca. I wanted to be able to identify the differences in religious practice due to age as well as provide a new source of information for those who are curious about the Wiccan religion. The literature on the Wiccan religion examine sexuality, gender empowerment, coven practices, and environmental/political views. Research on New Religious Movements include articles testing the Stark-Bainbridge Theory of Affiliation, the reflexivity and sense of self as defined by Mead influenced by New Religious Movements, and familial composition of those wanting to join New Religious Movements.

Although my research addresses the limitation in other research of age/generation as a variable, my research also contains room for future research. The potential for future research can extend my research by recreating my research with a larger sample size, explore how gender affects the shape of beliefs and practices, whether generational differences in Wicca were reflected in other religions, and how other characteristics (in addition to age) influence whether or not the practitioner sees their religion as individual or communal.

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